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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BEIRUT 000734

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TAGS: [KDEM](#) [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [KPAL](#) [KISL](#) [PTER](#) [LE](#) [IR](#) [SY](#)
SUBJECT: MGLE01: AOUN ON NATIONAL DIALOGUE:
WELL-MANNERED, WELL-MEANING, WITH UNCERTAIN RESULTS

Classified By: JEFFREY FELTMAN, AMBASSADOR. REASON: SECTION 1.5(B)

SUMMARY

1. (C) On March 9 the Ambassador and PolChief met with Michel Aoun and his aide, Gebran Basile. Aoun described the atmosphere of the national dialogue as friendly and open. Aoun was certain that the body's decision to "organize" Palestinian arms within six months would have the support of Hizballah, who fear Sunni extremists among the Palestinians. Although he saw no real hope of reaching a decision on the presidency, Aoun said the meeting might pursue a list of qualifications for the office that could enhance candidate selection. Aoun was complimentary as he spoke about most of his interlocutors. He took exception to the interventions of Jumblatt representative Ghazi Aridi, and said that Saad Hariri's inexperience was evident during the talks. Finally, asked if he was optimistic about the dialogue, Aoun took a long pause, and said that for his part he was working to make progress. End summary.

NATIONAL DIALOGUE--THE ATMOSPHERE

2. (C) Aoun said that he was happy for the break in the dialogue sessions. However, he said that he was looking forward to returning to them on March 13. Aoun was pleased when the Ambassador told him that Walid Jumblatt would be back in Beirut in time to attend the meetings. Aoun said that he had made a few interventions inside the meetings, and even fewer statements to the press outside of the meetings. "If things go badly on Monday, I will say something," Aoun promised. Saad Hariri, Amin Gemayel, and Ghazi Aridi were doing the bulk of the talking. Aridi was loud from the start, Aoun said. Speaking of Aridi's boss Jumblatt, Aoun said he began the talks with tough language. The general atmosphere in the room was friendly and civil. Aoun said that the leaders are discussing and exchanging views in a comfortable atmosphere. Even Samir Ja'ja', Aoun's Christian rival, was reasonable in his interventions, according to the general. All the more reason for the shock when Jumblatt, speaking from the U.S. delivered what Aoun called an "intercontinental missile" targeting Hizballah, Aoun said. Aoun said Hizballah had been well mannered and cooperative in the meetings, never using its weapons as leverage in the discussions. Aoun said that he expects the meetings to recommence on March 13 with a discussion of the Shebaa farms issue.

3. (C) The interaction among the dialogue participants was "reasonable," in Aoun's words. Aoun had praise for the behavior of Hassan Nasrallah. He found the interaction

between Nasrallah and Saad Hariri to be positive. Aoun said that the Lebanese must allay Hassan Nasrallah's fears and win his confidence before moving ahead to disarm Hizballah. He described the interaction between Berri and the other participants as constructive. Aoun explained that Berri had initially asked to recuse himself as moderator because he was a partisan leader in the dialogue. However, the other participants insisted that the Speaker play a role as host. Aoun gave PM Siniora good marks for his participation, and said there seemed to be an effort by Siniora to support the statements of Saad Hariri during the discussions. Hariri, according to Aoun's cautious assessment, was still inexperienced in political discourse. Aoun said he was uncertain as to who was advising Hariri (implying that advice to Saad had been faulty). Aoun also claimed to have noticed that Hariri was uneasy with Jumblatt, and "worried about Jumblatt all the time."

14. (C) From the outset of the talks, discussion followed the agenda laid out by Nabih Berri. The first topic was the investigation into the murder of Rafiq Hariri. On that, the interlocutors decided to support the GOL's call for a court of international character to pursue suspects. The decision of the group, including the Shia parties, Hizballah and Amal, paralleled the ministerial statement issued by the Siniora government in December, which had led to a Shia walkout from the cabinet. The second topic was UNSCR 1559, which, according to Aoun, was discussed in terms of its impact on the presidency. All of the dialogue participants accepted the notion that President Lahoud should leave office. The disagreements arose from procedures to be used to dislodge him. Aoun maintains that first finding a replacement of the president is an integral part of replacing him. Aoun said that no one is yet prepared to discuss who should succeed

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President Lahoud. The Ambassador asked if broad agreement to discuss UNSCR 1559 amounted to acceptance of the eventual implementation of the resolution. Aoun said that all of the parties accepted the eventual implementation of the resolution as a fact. The Ambassador recommended that Lebanese leaders de-link the issue of Shebaa farms from UNSCR 1559. He explained that, in the view of the international community, Lebanon has no authority to apply conditions to a Security Council resolution.

HIZBALLAH AND SHEBAA FARMS

15. (C) "No Lebanese can accept that Shebaa farms is not Lebanese," Aoun proclaimed. The Ambassador interjected that the international community had made that determination already. But Aoun persisted that the Lebanese would have to agree that Shebaa was theirs in order to move forward with diplomatic efforts to settle the matter. During early discussions in the dialogue, Aoun said Nabih Berri displayed maps and land deeds to prove the territory was Lebanese. The Ambassador shared USG concern that perhaps linking Hizballah's future with the future of Shebaa was a maneuver to allow the Syrians to have a veto on Hizballah's disarming. Aoun said that recognizing Shebaa as Lebanese would keep the border peaceful and allow Hizballah a way out of its present isolation.

16. (C) The ultimate goal of Aoun's policies on Shebaa is to reach internal agreement on the issue so that it can be taken to the international community. We can reach our goals through the United Nations," Aoun said. The Ambassador asked if Hizballah could be relied on to keep the peace along the Blue Line while the Lebanese government used diplomacy to settle the issue. Aoun said he would discuss this with Hizballah. He added that until now, he was satisfied that Hizballah was not causing trouble along the border with Israel. "For us, the Palestinian arms are most important." As a further example of his efforts to "pacify the region," Aoun said Hizballah and others were prepared to accept talks

on the status of Lebanese prisoners and exiles in Israel as well as the status of Lebanese prisoners in Syria. Aoun's aide Basile chimed in that a Hizballah representative traveling in the south has publicly said that those who died in the south during the Israeli occupation (South Lebanese Army members) were martyrs because they fought for their own cause. This was a major step away from normal Hizballah rhetoric that branded the SLA as traitors.

PALESTINIAN AND HIZBALLAH ARMS

17. (C) Aoun seemed pleased with the dialogue's proposal that a six-month deadline be issued for the "organization" of Palestinian arms outside of the camps. Hizballah partnership in dealing with Palestinian arms is vital, Aoun said. The Ambassador questioned whether Hizballah, a Syrian ally, could be counted on to help disarm the Palestinians also loyal to the Syrians, such as Palestinian leader Ahmed Jibril. Aoun said Hizballah would fear the Palestinians enough to make their relationship with Syria a secondary issue. "They are more Lebanese than you think," Aoun explained. He added that Sunni-Shia violence and threats issued by Jihadists labeling the Shia as non-believers have Nasrallah worrying about the armed Palestinians at his doorstep.

18. (C) Hizballah's arms and their final disposition did not render any clear consensus in the meetings, according to Aoun. Repeating his frequent refrain, Aoun said Hizballah was showing signs of moving away from commitment to liberate Palestine and appeared ready to restrict armed conflict to liberating and defending Lebanon. Aoun explained that he viewed the Shia as closer to the Christians than to the Sunni. Iran is a long way away, and Hizballah is not a part of an Iranian strategic defense plan, Aoun said. Responding to the Ambassador's question, Aoun said he understood that Nasrallah did not make a rumored trip to Damascus. Aoun allowed that Nasrallah might make a trip to Damascus in the future, but not as a part of the dialogue.

MONDAY'S MEETINGS AND JUMBLATT'S RETURN

19. (C) Aoun said he expected the issue of Hizballah's arms and Shebaa farms to head the agenda when the dialogue resumes March 13. He smiled broadly when the Ambassador told him that Walid Jumblatt should be back in Lebanon in time for the

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March 13 sessions of the dialogue. According to Aoun, Ghazi Aridi had not prepared himself to represent Jumblatt in the meetings. When the Ambassador asked Aoun if he was optimistic about the talks, Aoun took a moment, and then answered that he was working hard to make the talks work.
FELTMAN